



# Fleece

Deborah Prior between SAM and Art Pod  
by Teri Hoskin

Fleece is hair, fleece is pelt. Fleece is Jason and the Argonauts and Tom Robert's 1894 painting, *Shearing at Newstead*, later renamed *The Golden Fleece*, a title thought more apt for a country said to have begun on the sheep's back. The Land of the Golden Fleece: gold and power, and northern mythologies convicts and settlers bought with them from England.

It's common to proceed as if memory were behind us when in fact it is constantly being made\_unmade. In devising *Fleece* Deborah Prior imagined herself sitting in the Biodiversity Gallery in the South Australian Museum (SAM) ravelling and knitting that which she had knit and unravelled before, making 'a string' from a garment she wears. The actions of knitting are made of wraps, insertions, loops and slips whilst keeping a constant tension: knitting makes and records time passing. It is continuous never-ending work in a present made of events – the course and weft of warmth and protection, of covering and memory, conflict, hope, clans

and nations. Unpicking anything always produces snags, tangles and stoppages, no less than surprises. History like memory is made of the present past, and the past is made of its own present, incomplete as that is always.

Though the least hirsute of mammals humans collectively value hair as in(s)trin(g)sic to the composition of self, as a sign read by others of wisdom, virility, availability, wealth, health, danger; and as a warning signal skin prickles and hairs stand on end. Intimate to each living creature, hair like all reproducing cells, carries a unique DNA sequence. Hair has odour, variable tensility and pigment; hair, or lack of it, frames our face-to-the-world. We've probably all seen friends and loved ones who've lost their hair, even eyelashes – the therapy survivor becomes bald and vulnerable as the barrier between outside and inside becomes a cuticle of membrane. Prior worked with human hair and hand-shears before turning to wool, sheep hair. In this way she has drawn a thread

from personal body space to the creatures she knew on the farm: a not unlikely path to make considering her childhood as the girl with the long braid on the land where sheep grew, multiplied, and were shorn. I imagine a quiet child, observant, taking time daily to care for that long, long hair: combing, brushing, braiding. It must've felt strange for her as a girl on the cusp of becoming a woman to have the braid removed, the intimate task of tending cut.

Sitting as the 'exhibit' is hard work for a person not given to exhibitionism. What for? What does this exhibit-working do in the context of a display, first in the Museum of Natural History, followed by a retail space repurposed as Art Pod? The artist writes of,

'...sheep that grazed and trod on the land and sustained the growth of the colonisers and trampled underfoot those who'd always been there... My physical connection to the pile of string is I suppose, a metaphor for the threads of family connection / lineage and the interconnectedness of different histories: the far-reaching impact of government and personal decisions, actions and policies on different people and on the environment.'

String is the utilitarian mode of yarn. In Aboriginal traditions string is made with a drop spindle, hair or plant matter is spun and twisted into a ply. As a kind of umbilicus the cord or string Deborah Prior makes, '...connects to scientific displays, preserved species—a line



journal-traces inside other animals.' [1]

It's the 'traces inside other animals' that makes me take breath ... thread as a metaphor for connection is a well-worn story in contemporary art practice, while 'traces inside other animals' is primal and more than words and language, taxonomy and collections. Like Mona Hatoum's *Traffic* in the Art Gallery of South Australia there's an expression of unspeakable intimacy and suffering at play. In Hatoum's work long dark locks of human hair connect two battered suitcases that sit locked and upright on their hinged backs in readiness for flight. It's these fine long filaments of visceral memory that connect.

Museums, whether of Art or Natural History or Social Histories, are repositories of *human* understandings of *human* enquiries and inquiries. The necessary cataloguing of artefacts and artifacts will always manifest bones of contention between different understandings and realities, with varied attempts to balance the ownership of narratives through consultation and collaboration. [2] Museology is not an exact science, though it does promise to be a general science, a state/nation science, a world knowledge, and a universal knowledge – and it is here that contention lies: 'uni' is as one, yet 'we' are as many, and as diverse as the worlds of species and minerals and chemicals and forces that make cosmos, and 'we' are nothing without contention. Things are made, perceived and connected by Homo Sapiens – *human wise* – in relation to the multitude of elements that compose living and dying.

Everywhere ambiguous objects attract and repulse, attached and unattached they reside in boxes, drawers, files. In her forays into the extensive collections of the SAM Deborah Prior was (in her words);

'...seduced by the materiality of dozens of expertly spun skeins of strings and yarns. I was ambivalent about wanting to find out more about the people who made them, and the practical and ceremonial significance, and also conscious of my gaze as a museum visitor, and as an Anglo-Australian – what does it feel like to have your stories sealed under glass? Some things are not made to last forever.'

It's a vexed question for sure, that 'some things are not made to last forever' is a truism one can agree with and disagree with, certainly I'm grateful that ephemeral objects have been cared for, that the sheer diversity of life over time is considered. Admiring a sister basket woven from string, a boomerang carved from a tree branch, exquisitely made by the labour of a person 'unknown' produces an abiding sense of disquiet.

*Fleece* resonates through tangles, stoppages, sudden connections, silence and voice in spaces of display, collection and the archives of cultures alive, real flesh and blood people; 'whose hair am I *viewing* – whose Grandmother, Grandfather etc.?' [3] In 1987 James Luna laid himself in a closed glass vitrine and 'performed' *The Artifact Piece* at the San Diego Museum of Man. Luna, a Native American, was shocked by visitor comments – at how simple it was for onlookers

to assume he was simply another exhibit. So how to think about the many Aboriginal ropes, and nets, and strings made of human hair in SAM's collection? Contention and the making of knowledges is ongoing and alive only for as long as we continue to talk, converse, go 'there'. As a performer Deborah Prior is herself the exhibit. Child of sheep farmers 'I have benefitted from sheep (and wheat, oats and barley)' Our own kith and kin human-kind remnants are on display, exhibited behind glass or laying in a drawer.

Deborah Prior began her work of research and exhibition amongst the South Australian Museum drawers and vitrines, and has made her way to Art Pod, where the glass frontage makes another kind of vitrine. She enacts a performance of unravelling a knitted garment/skin and knitting the yarn again as a cord. Unknitting a garment whilst wearing it has a touch of the showgirl and the shaman: surely more than mere representation of thought, her performance resonates. Where is she psychically while knitting? In a lot of pain she says, knitting is calming, it keeps her in one place. Her perception of the Museum is one where, despite best efforts and practice, conservative paths of Nationhood are still retained through assumptions of ownership developed from anthropological narratives, ghosted by struggles over provenance. Work inspired by the collection is not supposed to make political judgements, more palatable are polite aesthetic observances and reproductions. Questions of land and its provenance posed hazy childhood questions formed around the dinner table where Deborah's parents spoke poor Pitjantjatjara (pidgin



Pitjantjatjara?) when they wanted to hide words they didn't want the kids to hear. Over time the sheep station became a mission and then Land Council managed Aboriginal community. Revisiting her own family archives through her paternal Grandmother's collection she has chosen Squatter™ tokens (a kind of Monopoly™ off the sheep's back) and other estranged objects through which the viewer sees a glimpse of a childhood 'on the land,' of generation and inheritance.

#### References

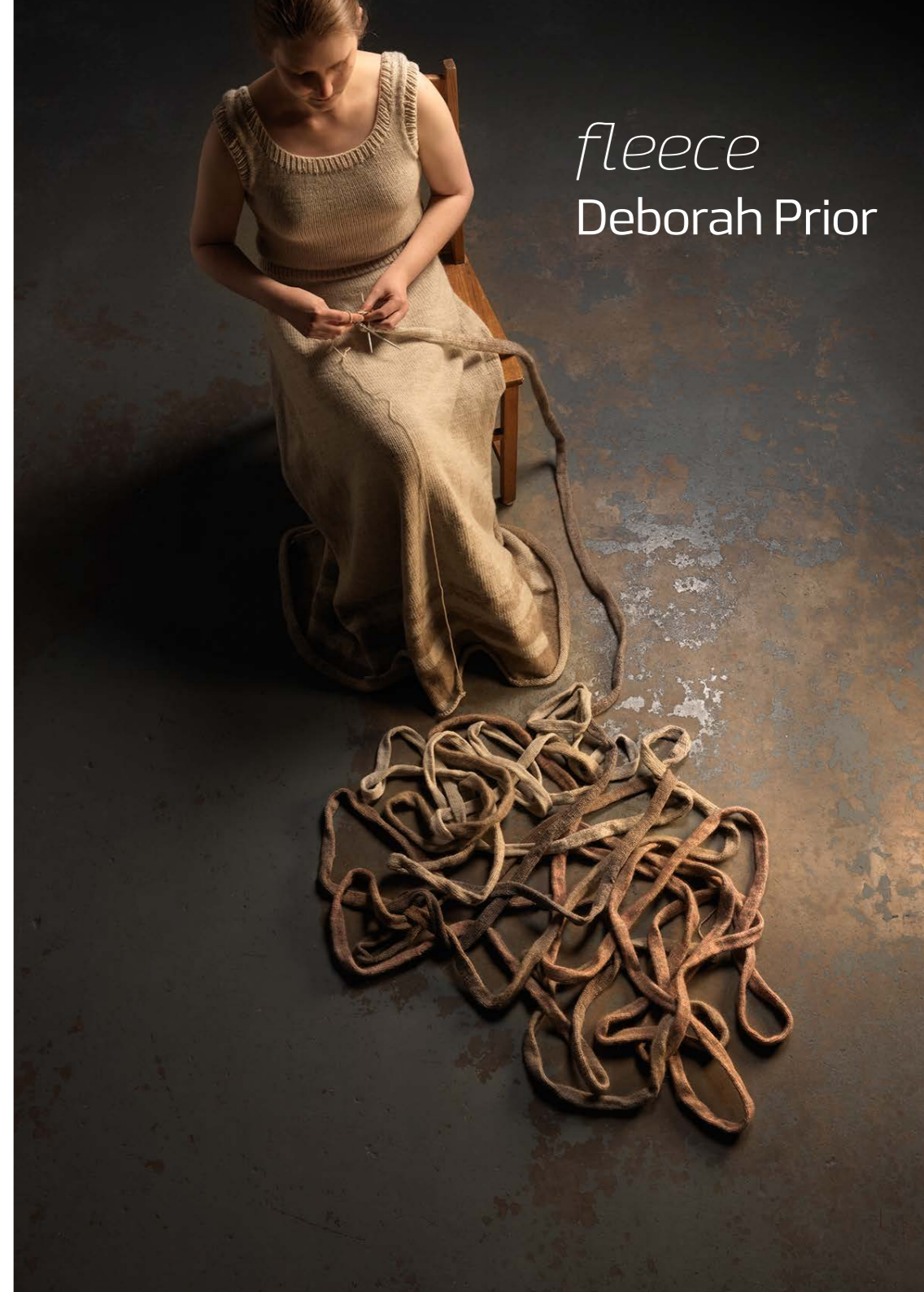
1. Deborah Prior notes.
2. See for example the Australian Aboriginal Collections Digitisation Project <http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/explore/image-galleries/australian-aboriginal-collections-digitisation-project>
3. In conversation with the artist. August 2014.

#### *Fleece*

Deborah Prior  
9 April - 5 June 2015  
Gallery viewable 24/7  
Art Pod, 25 Pirie Street, Adelaide  
Curated by Polly Dance, as part of Adelaide City Council's Emerging Curator Program

*Fleece* was informed by research undertaken for The Collections Project. The Collections Project is a collaborative project between Guildhouse and the South Australian Museum, providing artists the opportunity to reinterpret the museum's historical collection through the language of visual art, craft and design.

Cover image: Deborah Prior, *Fleece*, 2014-15, performance.  
Photo: Grant Hancock.  
Inside: Deborah Prior with Squatter tokens, 2014. Photo: Teri Hoskin.  
Deborah Prior, *The Sweet Inside of Your Arm*, 2009, silk and Merino yarn, dimensions: sleeve to fit one arm, collection of the artist. Photo: James Field.  
Deborah Prior, *Theobromine*, 2012, possum & Merino yarn, silk, beeswax, couverture dark chocolate, found table, dimensions: intestines for a larger-sized human, collection of the artist. Photo: James Field.



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